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Noordegraaf, J.

#### ***published in***

History of Linguistics 1996. Volume 2: From Classical to Contemporary Linguistics. Selected Papers from the Seventh International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences(ICHOLS VII) Oxford, 12-17 September 1996.

1999

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

#### ***citation for published version (APA)***

Noordegraaf, J. (1999). Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831) and the Science of Language. A Dutch linguist between two worlds. In D. Cram, A. Linn, & E. Nowak (Eds.), *History of Linguistics 1996. Volume 2: From Classical to Contemporary Linguistics. Selected Papers from the Seventh International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences(ICHOLS VII) Oxford, 12-17 September 1996.* (pp. 193-204).

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From: David Cram, Andrew Linn & Elke Nowak (eds), *History of Linguistics 1996*. Volume 2: *From Classical to Contemporary Linguistics. Selected Papers from the Seventh International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences (ICHOLS VII) Oxford, 12-17 September 1996*. (= Studies in the History of the Language Sciences, 95). Amsterdam: John Benjamins 1999, 193-204. ISBN 9027245835.

## **WILLEM BILDERDIJK (1756-1831) AND THE SCIENCE OF LANGUAGE**

### **A Dutch linguist between two worlds**

Jan Noordegraaf  
*VU University Amsterdam*

#### **0. Introduction**

In 1944, concluding his address about "the mystery of human language", the notorious Dutch linguist, Jac. van Ginneken, S.J., argued that "what the more recent conception of language only now begins to comprehend" had been felt and grasped much earlier by, among others, his compatriot Willem Bilderdijk.<sup>1</sup> In his paper, van Ginneken (1946:33) argued that "the most comprehensive miracle of the mind", language, had become "the richest and most venerable image of God on earth". Creation, then, had originated from Logos, the Eternal Word of the Father, as van Ginneken said. It was Willem Bilderdijk, van Ginneken continued, who, with similar hesitation to ours, had sensed the mystery of human language: on the dim boundaries between heaven and earth, as Bilderdijk had described it in one of his poems, matter and mind blend into each other. Thus van Ginneken *Anno Domini* 1944.

At first sight it seems an odd couple, the Nijmegen Jesuit on the one hand and Bilderdijk, the Calvinist poet, on the other. Willem Bilderdijk, however, was not only a poet, but also a linguist, and what is more, a controversial personality. His life and works, characterized by great paradoxes, have continued to intrigue Dutch scholars, both his contemporaries as well as later contemplators. In this paper I would like to discuss some of Bilderdijk's linguistic ideas against the background of the ongoing debate on the transition which took place in the study of language in the early decades of the 19th century. The case of Bilderdijk is the more interesting because scholars have been pointing at his apparent split personality. In this connection linguists have identified two distinct elements, etymology and mysticism. I will deal with both of them, but first I will provide some biographical data concerning this much debated Dutch linguist.

#### **1. Willem Bilderdijk (1756-1831)**

Bilderdijk was one of the most remarkable Dutch poets of the 19th century. He was a supporter of the House of Orange, and as a consequence, in 1795 when the Stadtholder William V fled to

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was also presented at the 8th Biennial Interdisciplinary Conference on Netherlandic Studies 12-15 June 1996, Columbia University and City University of New York Graduate Center, New York City. Quotations in Dutch have been rendered into English.

England and the 'Batavian Republic' was founded, Bilderdijk refused to pledge his loyalty to the



new *régime* and accept the ideas of the French Revolution. Forced to go into exile, he left his wife, children, and debts behind. When in England, he fell head over heels in love with a young girl, with whom he lived until his death in a 'Gewissensehe'. In 1797, they left for Germany, remaining there until 1806, the year in which Bilderdijk was allowed to return to Holland. In 1815, King William I tried to have him appointed Professor of Dutch at the University of Amsterdam, but in vain, as the opposition was too strong. Bilderdijk was one of the last great Dutch polyhistor, publishing on subjects such as geology, national history, perspective and architecture, and writing three hundred thousand lines of poetry.

As a linguist Bilderdijk lived between two worlds. His formative period was the last quarter of the 18th century, and he witnessed the rise of historical grammar in the 19th century. A prolific author, he published some thirty volumes on linguistics. Bilderdijk was familiar with some twenty-five to thirty languages: not only the modern Western languages, but also Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian and various exotic languages. He was acquainted with the methods of the Schola Hemsterhusiana which had a certain impact on early comparative historical grammar. Furthermore, he owned the works of Lambert ten Kate; and on his shelves he had a copy of Schlegel's *Über die Weisheit und Sprache der Indier* (1808) and a few other books on Sanskrit. He received a copy of the *Deutsche Grammatik* from Jacob Grimm himself. Thus, Bilderdijk was well-equipped for promoting the new historical study of language in 19th-century Holland. Yet, he never did. Here, I shall discuss this case by comparing Bilderdijk's linguistic views with those held by some other 18th and 19th-century scholars, inevitably in a concise manner.

## 2. Bilderdijk and 18th and 19th-century linguistics

### 2.1. *Ten Kate*.

It is a well-established fact that the Dutchman Lambert ten Kate (1674-1731) enjoys a place of honour as one of the founding fathers of Germanic linguistics. His *Gemeenschap tussen de Gottische spraeke en de Nederduytsche* ('Common grounds of the Gothic and Dutch languages') appeared in 1710, and the remarkable *Aenleiding tot de Kennisse van het Verhevene Deel der Nederduitsche Sprake* ('Introduction to the Exalted Part of the Dutch Language') was published in 1723. Ten Kate is considered to be a pioneer of an empirical, inductive method and a worthy predecessor of Jacob Grimm. In the first and second decades of the 18th century, ten Kate discovered the phenomenon of Ablaut in the strong verb system.

Although Bilderdijk is known to be a proponent of an empirical approach, his opinion on ten Kate differed greatly from the positive assessment by other critics. Conceding that Ten Kate was "the oracle of many a student of language", Bilderdijk stated that one would have to be blind not to observe the stupid ignorance of this "digger" who claimed to have searched Antiquity, but who failed to understand its language, "knowing little about its past or that of other languages". To Bilderdijk's mind, following the publication of ten Kate's works it had become a sort of frenzy to deduce each Dutch word from Gothic or Anglo-Saxon. But our language, Dutch, did not originate from Gothic or Anglo-Saxon, it was older and of an Eastern origin (1822,I:9-10), and there was no need to analyse it with the help of language comparison: it was a "système complet" in itself (1810:97).

Bilderdijk reminds us of his notorious compatriot Goropius Becanus (1519-1572/3). In 1810, he submitted a *Mémoire* to the government of the Batavian Republic pointing out that the study of Dutch was "du plus grand intérêt pour la science universelle des langues" because of its "ancienneté et sa pureté".

D'après cet aperçu l'on se flatte, que [...] le Hollandais sera toujours envisagé par les vrais savans comme une des langues qui doivent inspirer le plus d'intérêt, et dont il n'est pas indifférent pour la véritable érudition de conserver et de protéger l'étude methodique et scientifique, surtout relativement à l'Etymologie universelle et comparative (1810:101).

Elsewhere Bilderdijk reproached "the scholars of so many countries and so many ages" for not having been able to find the 'general language' "which was sought so far away but which, in fact, is so close to us". Thus he claimed that the Dutch language had a privileged position when searching for the original language.

Note that although Bilderdijk regarded Kate as an incompetent scholar, he did borrow quite a few ideas from ten Kate in his *Nederlandsche Spraakleer* ('Dutch Grammar') of 1826.

### 2.2. *Schola Hemsterhusiana*.

The Schola Hemsterhusiana, a group of Dutch 18th-century classical scholars, gained its reputation by its etymological method of investigating language based on principles of reconstruction. Tiberius Hemsterhuis *cum suis* sought to explain the form and meaning of existing words by postulating hypothetical primitive verbs of two, three and four letters using all possible vowel-consonant combinations. In 1765, Lodewijk C. Valckenaer became Hemsterhuis's successor as Professor of Greek at Leiden, and after Hemsterhuis's demise he became the head of the Schola.

Bilderdijk read law at Leiden University in the years 1780-1782, when Valckenaer was still

teaching Greek there. Bilderdijk "absorbed" Valckenaer's ideas on etymology in general and on Greek in particular. In other words, Valckenaer's principle, to explain and deduce the Greek language from itself was accepted by Bilderdijk and applied to his mother tongue. To Bilderdijk's mind, among the Germanic languages the Dutch language was privileged as it could be fully deduced and explained from itself.

As Bilderdijk saw it in 1812, the science of etymology "en est encore à former". He told Jacob Grimm:

la méthode d'étymologiser [...] c'est à dire, remonter d'un mot donné à sa racine première, en la désenveloppant par une suite de réductions qui le ramènent de changement en changement jusques à sa forme originaire et primitive. Et cette analyse n'a jamais été traitée elle-même avec méthode (1837:27). [...] il faut avoir devant les yeux *l'histoire de chaque mot dans l'ordre du temps*, et (pour la comparaison des langues) il faut la posséder *synchroniquement* (1837:28-29; emphasis added).

And in another letter (1813) he remarked:

Il est clair que le mot primitif ne consiste que dans la consonne radicale avec sa voyelle, et que le reste n'est qu'une suite des opérations techniques (1837:38).

Whereas the Hemsterhusians started from five basic vowels when reconstructing the Greek language, Bilderdijk claimed that the primitive language consisted of consonants. Applying well-known "opérations techniques" such as insertion, addition and deletion of letters, every word in every language could be accounted for.

Comparing Bilderdijk to the Schola Hemsterhusiana another, more interesting distinction turns up. This concerns the origin of language. Valckenaer considered Mankind to be the *conditor linguae*, the founder of language. Discussing the Greek language, he admired the way it can smoothly generate an infinite number of compounds. This has to do, Valckenaer argued, with the principles of compounding and joining settled by the first founders of that admirable Greek language. On this occasion Bilderdijk's friend J.H. Halbertsma remarked mockingly that it looked as though the Greek people decided in public meetings on the principles of their language. One may assume, then, that Valckenaer held the familiar conception of the 'arbitraire' of the 'signe linguistique', the idea that the linguistic sign is purely conventional.

Bilderdijk is known to have been averse to anything based on convention, also with regard to language. In language, nothing is based on convention; language flows out of Man's most intimate nature, as it has its seat in the human soul. As Bilderdijk put it in his 'Last Will and Testament' (1806): the analysis of all languages can be reduced to one. All words result from a few root letters, whose meaning lies in the character of the organ of speech by which it is created. For example, in the length and vibration of the tongue; in the cavity of the throat, and so on. This having been revealed, the whole language is clear and evident, and all languages correspond to each other. In other words, to Bilderdijk each individual sound was the natural expression of some primitive element of the closely related spiritual and material world. Sounds produced by the tongue expressed action and, consequently, anything masculine. Similarly, Bilderdijk sought to explain the relationship between the gender of a word and its form on the basis of elements of sounds which, by nature, were the expression of something masculine (active) or something feminine (passive or dependent). According to Bilderdijk, there is a correspondence between the sensations which Man experiences and the speech organs and sounds with which Man expresses these sensations or thoughts. So, sounds are not just arbitrary sounds, but they are (or were) the adequate expression of these sensations and thoughts.

Thus, Bilderdijk was definitely not an adherent of the doctrine of the 'arbitraire du signe'. He

propounded a 'language of nature', practising a sort of 'physical or organic etymology', and he did so to a great extent in the wake of Charles de Brosses's *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues* (1765).

This brings me to a further observation, pertaining to Bilderdijk's sources of inspiration. Willem Bilderdijk was widely-read and a great eclectic. His sources and debating partners, however, are mainly scholars from the 17th and 18th centuries: Leibniz, English linguists such as Harris, Horne Tooke, and the Frenchman Court de Gébelin, the author of a *Histoire naturelle de la parole* (1776). Though he lived on into the third decade of the 19th century, Bilderdijk was essentially a scholar of the 18th century; his scholarship should, therefore, be understood and judged within that context.

In his arguments, Bilderdijk practised what was called by one of his compatriots a purely "empirical general linguistics", striving at the reconstruction of the 'root letters' in the *lingua primaeva*. Note that Bilderdijk was an empiricist and an admirer of Francis Bacon. However, natural science, which according to Bilderdijk has to be based solely upon observations, is not capable of attaining the essence of things. Bilderdijk emphasized that a science based on human observations will never be able to propound the truth.

To sum up, according to Bilderdijk, 1) there is a small number of universal roots, consisting of a consonant plus a vowel or other consonants; by means of a number of rules one can build a variety of words; 2) the Dutch language has preserved the primitive language very well; by studying Dutch one can find universal roots; and 3) as Dutch is a more or less self-contained system language comparison is not strictly necessary: "tout s'explique philosophiquement sans le secours d'aucune autre langue" (1810:97).

It might appear now that Bilderdijk was a sort of composite of De Brosses, Horne Tooke, Becanus and a few other linguists. However, there is more to be said about this.

### 2.3. Grimm.

When preparing his *Deutsche Grammatik*, Jacob Grimm borrowed a copy of one of the works of ten Kate from the Göttingen library. In 1818 he admitted to one of his Dutch friends "dass ich [...] wenig daraus gelernt habe, und fast in Bilderdijks Urteil einstimmen muss, wiewohl ich mich bescheidener ausdrücken werde". According to Grimm, ten Kate's work "ist eine geschmacklose, beinahe unverdauliche Anhäufung fleissiger aber ungründlicher Materialien". In a survey of the sources, in the first volume of his *Deutsche Grammatik* (1819), Grimm deemed ten Kate's "wortableitungen [...] einseitig". They "nehmen auf andere nicht minder wichtige grundtriebe der sprache keine rücksicht [...]" (cf. Jongeneelen 1992:210-211). Later Grimm was more positive: "Ten Kate hat die Ablaute zuerst in ihrer Wichtigkeit hervorgehoben, nur die Vocalunterschiede nicht strenge genug, am wenigstens die der Consonante beobachtet" (Grimm 1877:66n).

It is known (cf. Soeteman 1989:237) that in the years 1813-14 Grimm studied the works of Horne Tooke and Walter Whiter's notorious *Etymologicon Universale*, just as Bilderdijk did. As it appears, there are some points of agreement between Bilderdijk and Grimm: they both practised 'die wilde Philologie'. Obviously, Grimm failed to see the importance of ten Kate, whereas in the second decade of the 19th century he did revere "ein umgetriebener Phantast" (Arens) such as Johann Arnold Kanne (1773-1834). Grimm held Bilderdijk in great esteem: "Auf Bilderdijks Urtheil über meine Arbeit in einem Fach worin er so viel weiss, bin ich höchst begierig". One could say, then, that Grimm and Bilderdijk were cognate souls - only for a certain time, for in 1831 Grimm talked about Bilderdijk's "grundideeen, die ich für falsch halte".

### 3. Bilderdijk the poet

In 1819, Grimm sent Bilderdijk the first volume of the *Deutsche Grammatik*, and in 1822 he sent

him a copy of its second edition, in spite of the fact that

vous ne m'en avez rien dit sur la première édition [...]. Je l'ai pris d'abord pour un signe de votre désapprobation; plus tard j'ai préféré de croire, que vous avez voulu vous éviter l'embarras d'entrer en discussion sur des objets, qui à cause de la prolixité de leur détail ne peuvent point être traités dans quelques lettres (Soeteman 1989:240).

Five years later, in 1827, Grimm wrote to another Dutch correspondent: "Von Bilderdyk höre und sehe ich nichts mehr; auf zusendung meiner grammatik hat er mir nicht geantwortet, auch seit dem allen verkehr abgebrochen" (Soeteman 1989:241). Why did Bilderdijk no longer reply to his "très estimable Ami" ?

It can be argued that Grimm's approach did not fit in with the views Bilderdijk stood for. Grimm was an early positivist, an opponent of speculation in linguistics. To his mind, not a single element of language would remain ambiguous: in the course of time all veils would be removed (Bakker 1977:131). Bilderdijk, however, was not only a linguist, but also a poet who composed several poems about language. In *De Dieren* ('The Animals', 1817), for example, Bilderdijk argued that language is not just a piece of art but a divine gift to mankind, a gift which had deteriorated and degenerated following the Fall of Man. God has implanted language in Man as a mystery. And in his didactic poem *De Taal* ('Language') of 1822 he propounded that whoever is striving at knowledge should study language, "the invaluable legacy of Adam", and it is well-known that according to a certain tradition Adam was the greatest philosopher and etymologist who ever lived. Following Genesis, Bilderdijk reminds his readers that it was Adam who gave a name to each animal according to its character. Knowledge of language implies deeply-probing knowledge of the spirit:

Language includes more spirit, more wisdom  
than Plato's school, than the whole of Athens can comprise [...]  
Try to discover in language your own Self, your God.

So, to Bilderdijk, language was more than a conventional means of communication: the original language contains wisdom, even divine wisdom: "every word carries more wisdom than the whole earth can comprise". But after the Fall, language declined and chilled, and wisdom perished (cf. Bosch 1985). This is a doctrine which in the literature is known as the Adamic language doctrine, and which, as I see it, is part of the background of Bilderdijk's conception of language.

An elucidating quotation may be adduced from a further source, his somewhat premature 'Last Will and Testament' (1806):

It is the knowledge of language which should make us acquainted with the soul of man and in it the spiritual world. And when perfecting this knowledge the spirit inevitably will be ennobled and elevate itself beyond this world. It goes without saying that there are many failures and peculiarities, but after thirty years of experience I venture to recommend my global views and principles as more than just illusions [...] (1806:70).

One of his contemporaries observed that the ultimate aim of Bilderdijk's study of etymology is knowledge of a very special nature (Kinker 1838:146). From etymology Bilderdijk sought to transcend to a spiritual world. He was, therefore, aiming towards a higher sort of etymology which might aptly be called 'etymosophy'. When reading Bilderdijk's poems on language along with several passages of his non-linguistic writings one recognizes certain elements in Bilderdijk's

argument. These elements are of a *gnostic* nature; it can be assumed that Bilderdijk's ideas were firmly rooted in 18th-century theosophy. Thanks to a remaining spiritual spark, Man is related to God. Consciousness of God is identical to selfconsciousness, which implies knowledge of the higher Self. As Bilderdijk put forward in his poems, it is language which reflects this very special knowledge.

As can be concluded from his correspondence, Bilderdijk criticized contemporary linguists who sought to unveil these foundations of language, arguing that even the most brilliant etymologists had not proceeded far enough; they did not take into account the metaphysical dimension of language, and therefore the present study of etymology was "cancerous". Ultimately, real knowledge of the meaning of what Bilderdijk called the 'sounds of speech' and 'the parts of speech' cannot be obtained by empirical research but exclusively through direct information from a Higher Being, through inspiration. A religious man, Bilderdijk was looking for a mystical, higher etymology which would unlock the soul and, with it, the entire spiritual world. In this way, the human spirit could eventually elevate itself beyond this world. In my introduction I mentioned van Ginneken's reference to Bilderdijk in his address about "the mystery of human language". I venture to conclude that van Ginneken had a sound appreciation of his Calvinist counterpart.

Bilderdijk did not believe that prolonged empirical and inductive language study along historical lines would eventually provide us with the results he desired. It is clear that if the ultimate grounds of language are of a mystical origin, then historical linguistics *à la* Grimm is nothing but a dead end. Thus, Bilderdijk found he could not join the comparative historical enterprise *à la* Grimm and Bopp. As he saw it, the "metaphysical truth" is beyond any historical fact (Ankersmit 1996:65).

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Was Bilderdijk a split personality who held two different standpoints, one in his linguistic works and one in his poetical works ? According to the first, following a mechanistic, physicalist tradition, language was a creation of Man; according to the second standpoint it was a gift from God. Inconsistency or paradox ?

Has Man created language himself, Bilderdijk asks in one of his writings. One might consider it as a possibility, he says. He himself, however, was convinced of the contrary: language was something taught to Man by a higher being and as such reproduced by Man. However, *this is irrelevant here*, he added (1806:37; emphasis added).

In the preface to his 'List of Gender' he also remarked that the phenomenon of gender was based upon and was a consequence of a higher Metaphysical Principle, *which cannot be discussed here* (1822,I:9; emphasis added). I surmise, then, that Bilderdijk when writing as a scholar sought to remain as much as possible within the realm of the linguistic paradigm he had once embraced, the world of De Brosses and Horne Tooke. After all, he was an advocate of an inductive and empirical approach, and a serious scholar who wanted to follow the scientific *discours* as far as possible.

At the same time, Bilderdijk was deeply convinced that linguistic systems, arrangements achieved by human efforts, are basically defective. Absolute Truth can be found in God only. And with regard to this absolute truth it is preferable to express an idea in poetry, which may be considered by far the better way of reflecting the divine spark in man. This, as I see it, is the true Bilderdijk, who we can only find by searching for his presuppositions hidden in his non-linguistic works. For linguistic science, in particular in its early 19th-century form, is not always directed by rational motives.

In 1786, Sir William Jones argued that Greek, Latin and Sanskrit "sprung from some common source, which, perhaps, no longer exists". It is clear that Jones was not yet free from religious



views on the relationship between languages, for in the ninth 'Annual Discourse' (1792) Jones admitted that this lost common source had actually been the language of the descendants of Noah. But it was useless to search for it; after all, "the language of Noah is lost irretrievably". As has been suggested (cf. Swiggers & Desmet 1996:141-142), we might read Jones's statements as a contribution to the 18th-century debate on the polygenesis or monogenesis of languages. At this point, Bilderdijk is one of the participants in the 18th-century debate. He deemed himself to be capable of reconstructing the original language. Bilderdijk spoke of a "souche commune" (1810:96), a common ancestor, of the languages from the East and the West, and elsewhere he acknowledged the striking conformity between Dutch, Persian and "la langue des Indous" (1810:98). However, he drew different conclusions from these insights than Jones did.

All in all, I would like to suggest that Bilderdijk's negative attitude towards early 19th-century historical linguistics is ultimately based on his metaphysical stance, his belief in the divine Logos which manifests itself in the foundations of language. We can see Bilderdijk as between heaven and earth, as a linguist between two worlds.

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